The firing of Screen Actors Guild chief negotiator Doug Allen

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On January 26 a majority of the Screen Actors Guild national board fired the union's executive director and chief negotiator, Doug Allen. The dismissal is an olive branch to the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and a signal that the SAG board intends to capitulate shortly to the demands of the employers and the media and sign a rotten agreement.

Allen had opposed the conglomerates' final offer, made last June on the eve of the expiration of the contract, and most recently proposed that SAG members vote yes or no on that offer. While his trade unionist outlook represented no serious threat to the industry giants, his insistence that the AMPTP proposal was miserable proved something of an obstacle; so he was forced out.

Two weeks ago, during a special SAG board meeting, supporters of the Unite for Strength opposition to Allen and guild president Alan Rosenberg, along with allies from New York and other regions, introduced a motion to fire Allen during a 28-hour marathon session. The move failed at the time because of a filibuster organized by Rosenberg's supporters. The opposition subsequently organized the documentation necessary to remove Allen from his post.

Allen's ouster became effective immediately. He has been replaced on an interim basis by David White, the union's general counsel from 2002 to 2006. White is a thoroughly establishment figure, with ties to the industry, whom the opposition faction hopes will quickly help organize a deal with the AMPTP.

According to the SAG web site, White "co-founded and served as the managing principal of the consulting firm Entertainment Strategies Group (ESG). A graduate of Stanford Law School and a Rhodes Scholar, White was previously a labor and employment attorney at the Los Angeles firm of O'Melveny & Myers."

O'Melveny & Myers is the 19th largest law firm in the world and has represented the likes of Exxon, Enron, Fannie Mae and Goldman Sachs, as well as Hollywood's New Line Cinema and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios.

In Los Angeles, where the firm is based, it represented the Los Angeles Unified School District against the teachers in a 1988 strike. On picket lines and marches, teachers chanted, "O'Melveny and Myers, they're such a bunch of liars!"

White will not function, as Allen did (for a $500,000 annual salary), as both executive director and as chief contract negotiator. The latter post has been assigned to John T. McGuire. The *New York Times* calls McGuire "the consummate insider, participating in or leading more than 30 contract negotiations in his 40 years with the guild."

Along with firing Allen, the board majority replaced the entire negotiating committee, and a task force has been appointed to secure a contract. They have also forbidden anyone but White, McGuire or someone the majority designates to communicate on behalf of SAG.

The *Hollywood Reporter* emphatically gloats, "The ousting of Allen virtually eliminates any possibility of an actors´ strike.... The newly reconstituted negotiating leadership's focus will be on nailing down a deal with employers in the AMPTP, likely the same one that has been on the table since June 30 that resembles that which the DGA [Directors Guild of America], WGA [Writers Guild] and AFTRA [American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] have already ratified."

Such a contract would mean paltry residuals from original and derivative programming on the Internet, the ending of force majeure provisions, unauthorized use of actors' clips from television programs and films

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for commercial purpose, the requirement that actors promote "in-scripted" commercials on television shows as a basis for employment, along with a host of other rollbacks.

Selling the members on such a contract, whose terms are widely unpopular, particularly among the rank and file in Hollywood, will be no easy matter. There is speculation in the media that the AMPTP will attempt to sweeten the deal, perhaps by relenting on the force majeure issue, in an effort to obtain SAG ratification.

Rosenberg denounced his union rivals, calling them "gutless, dishonest and immoral." He claimed that the opposition had deliberately sabotaged negotiations "so that our progressive leadership would be made to appear inept, which would pave the way toward a return to the go-along-to-get-along days of yore." The guild president asserted that Allen was fired because he was "simply too good, too strong and too much of a unionist."

No doubt recent events have shifted the guild leadership to the right and further into the arms of studio and network executives, who are bound to be pleased with the result. However, that hardly constitutes a defense of the Rosenberg-Allen leadership, whose impotence, stalling and lack of a political perspective have opened the door to the right wing.

At no time has the SAG leadership offered a way forward against the conglomerates. The guild entered negotiations with the AMPTP last April, two-and-half months before the present contract expired on June 30, without a strike authorization—despite the fact that the AMPTP had announced it would not budge one inch from its original offer. The experience of last fall's writers' strike, as well as the lousy contract signed by AFTRA last summer, clearly stiffened the AMPTP's resolve.

Allen and Rosenberg approached negotiations with the AMPTP as if the latter's negotiators were simply wrongheaded chums and professional colleagues with shared goals and common interests. It wasn't until after the AMPTP walked out of the negotiations that both leaders began to campaign for a strike authorization from the membership to give the national board some supposed muscle in its efforts to bring the employers back to the negotiating table.

But the talk of such an authorization was largely empty. Rosenberg and Allen never tired of reminding the membership at various mass meetings held in Hollywood and New York that nobody wanted a strike; that a strike authorization did not necessarily mean the union would in fact go on strike; and that it was just a tool to convince the AMPTP that the union was serious. This kind of a bluff did precisely the opposite: it convinced the AMPTP that the SAG leaders would not put up a fight.

Rosenberg told a television interviewer late last year that, "We have to put bullets in our gun in order to get a deal. Our hope is that will make the AMPTP come back to the table and talk to us."

The WSWS noted that, "Such hopes—in fact, wishful thinking—are unserious and irresponsible. Rosenberg and company are playing games with the jobs and livelihoods of their members. The AMPTP has not moved an inch in the face of SAG's antics and, indeed, now threatens to use the economic crisis as an excuse to withdraw its ‘final offer.'"

In any event, no faction within the SAG leadership has any viable program for defending actors against the AMPTP's assaults. They all accept the private ownership of the industry and the corporations' right to organize film and television work according to their profit interests, as well as the subordination of workers politically to big business through support for Barack Obama and the Democratic Party.

The present economic slump will not go away, and the lack of resistance by the SAG leadership will only embolden the conglomerates to redouble their efforts to send actors and others in the industry back to the "glory days" of the 1930s, when wage cuts were imposed virtually at will.

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